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Chapter Thirteen: Zara and David VI

June, 2021 - Days after David's death

Upon returning to the position assigned to us in France, my wounds were treated, and our entire platoon was put on reserve for a few days. Apparently, David was not

the only casualty that day. Ferrero, from the assault team, and Kuenburg, from the communications team, also died. Ferrero was crushed by debris, and Kuenburg was executed after being captured. They knew because they found his body after clearing an Amere outpost. In addition to those two... three, there were many injured, myself included, so they decided to put us on hold until the platoon could be considered operational again.

The building used to be a medical dispensary that was repurposed for our needs. We used the many consulting rooms and halls as individual rooms, while the basement served as a storage and armory.

I shared a room with David, so at that moment... I was alone.

I looked lazily at the clock on one of the four white walls of the room and felt the urge to get up from the bed I was sitting on and throw it to the floor with all my strength. Its ticking annoyed me. Time, time, time. But I didn't do it; I just

observed it with my tired, burdened eyes. I wore white shorts and a green t-shirt to be comfortable, although it was difficult with the bandages on my leg in plain sight. As I had suspected, it wasn't anything serious, but it was painful and made walking difficult.

Just below the clock, David's AUG rested on some empty supply crates. It was still dirty, covered in dirt and blood. Of course, it no longer belonged to him, but it wasn't legally under my responsibility either, so I couldn't sit down to clean it just because I felt like it. Seeing it there comforted me a little. I thought about the significance of my weapon being the one lost in the operation and not his, and him being the one who died and not me.

I left a part of myself behind, something I could never recover.

Trying to forget about the clock, I turned my head towards the window on one of the adjacent walls, and outside, I could see four fellow countrymen on guard duty, coming and going, guarding one of

the entrances to the compound. They took it easy, as expected, since it wasn't common for Amere attacks to occur during the day. According to what I had heard, they hadn't detected any aerial movement to the north either, so... yes, they could relax.

But I couldn't. I couldn't calm down.

On the bedside table next to the bunk, my phone kept vibrating and vibrating. It had been like that for a couple of hours, intermittently alerting me to a call that I didn't want to answer. It was probably Zara, just calling to check on me. I didn't want to, I couldn't talk to her. I still remembered, and I still remember, those broken eyes she looked at me with when... I couldn't, I couldn't face that again in such a fragile state. I didn't know if I wanted to calm down, if I wanted to forget, or if I just needed to escape from my own head.

What would come next? What would happen to me? What did I deserve to happen to me? I never met David's

parents; he never talked about his family. But I couldn't do anything else but go to them when the war ended and beg for forgiveness on my knees for prioritizing my safety over saving their son.

When the war ended...

Would I still be alive? I had never been so close to death before, and it made me truly understand how fragile the thread of my destiny was. Perhaps next time it would be by a grenade or an execution with a bullet to the back of the head. Anything could happen.

The phone rang again. I reluctantly approached, sliding over the bed to pick it up with one hand. There were over fifteen missed calls from Zara, but this... it wasn't her calling this time.

I felt the air leave my lungs against my will as I brought the phone to my head and answered. I tried to sound like I always did, but even I was surprised to hear my own voice, which seemed to have been expelled not from my own lips, but from those of a dying old man on his

deathbed.

"Sir."

"How are you feeling today, Braviel? Do you think you can get to my office?"

It was Kyd, probably interested in knowing about my condition. He must have been keeping track of all the other wounded and was calling us one by one. I don't think I noticed at that time the dryness with which I responded to him.

"Walking hurts and the pills make me feel tired. I don't think I can go today."

"Alright... I'll be waiting for you at five. Be punctual, I just want to talk."

"..."

"Understood?"

"Understood."

"It's just a matter of some formalities regarding your inactive status and reports from the previous operation. You also need to sign the loss of your weapon and the

transfer of Vann Floors' weapon to you. Paperwork, nothing more than that."

"Does it mean I can get to cleaning the rifle?"

"You shouldn't but I authorize you."

"I'll get to it. Later I-"

"Braviel."

"Yes, sir?"

"Heart insisted that you wouldn't pick her calls. Is there any reason?"

"..."

There was a reason.

But it wasn't as if I could express it, it wasn't as if words would allow me to do so. It wasn't as if the torrent of words spewing from the abyss I called a mouth could explain what my chest felt.

How could I escape such a situation if not by employing deceit?

"No, not really."

"I understand... well, she mentioned that

she would come to visit you in a few minutes. I order you not to reject her and at least listen to what she has to say."

"Oh... alright."

"Good."

Having said that and without uttering another word, Kyd hung up the call, leaving me staring at the blank wall in front of me, wondering if I should simply take a handful of painkillers to be asleep by the time Zara arrived. But that's not what I did in the end. I left the phone where it was and got up from the bed, using the bedside table for support to prevent myself from falling due to the weakness in my injured leg. It was difficult to approach, but I took David's rifle and quickly returned to the bed, where I sat down and placed it on my lap. Dirt, dried blood, and a few scratches. I checked both sides, inspected the chamber through the magazine well, and pulled the slide back to ensure there were no obstructions... in the end, it was just dirty, not inoperable.

"..."

With the thumb of my left hand, the hand I used to hold the buttstock, I applied some friction to one of the many bloodstains splattered on the weapon until it crumbled into small solid fragments and fell to the floor. I did the same a couple more times, also with the mud stains, until a significant portion of the back of the gun was clear. I gently ran my finger over the button to release the buttstock cover and access the compartment where maintenance items for the weapon are stored, and instead of removing it, I pressed it firmly while pulling the cover with my right hand. It was a little trick we used to open that section without needing to remove the pin.

The cover opened forcefully, as if it had been under pressure, and a couple of things fell to the floor. This wasn't normal, so I proceeded to examine the interior of the compartment, and what I found there

were various objects that David seemed to keep for pleasure and convenience. That idiot... there were many candies, cigarettes, and even a condom. And there was also a piece of paper of notable thickness and quality that was finely folded in half. It was the size of a notebook page.

"David...?"

I carefully removed it and placed the AUG back on my lap, directing my attention to the paper left there, who knows when. On it, I could read something like 'From: David, To: Berthe.' By that point, I began to suspect what it was, as although he never mentioned it, I assumed it was a farewell letter, most likely for his mother or some sister we didn't know. Many of my comrades did the same, although I didn't know of anyone who preferred to carry the letter everywhere inside their own weapon, which could easily end up in enemy hands if one were to die. In this case, David just... got lucky, we could say.

I unfolded the note and took a deep breath, preparing myself for what I was about to face.

As expected, it was a well-written letter, with a small rectangular photograph attached to the bottom right corner. In the picture, there was a small, gray-haired woman sitting in a chair, surrounded by five men, all of them redheads. David was

on the far right of them all, smiling in a way that I had never witnessed in person. All the men were wearing the standard army uniform, except for David, who I can imagine had not yet joined the force.

They were his brothers, no doubt about that. It was curious because David never told us about them, let alone that there were so many and that they were in the military.

Ah...

I don't remember the exact words of the note, as many years have passed. But I do know what it was about, so I will try to reconstruct some of the words that David left before he died.

Hello, Mom. First of all, I want you to stop crying right now. I know that if this note ends up in your hands, it can only mean that I was killed in combat, so I can't be there to joke with you and lift your spirits.

Mom, I'm sorry for leaving you alone.

Karl, Roumald, Alex, and Heinrich,

they all died before me, so I promised myself that I would come back to you one way or another... but it seems luck wasn't on my side.

Don't cry, Mom. Please, please don't cry. I think I can even hear you right now.

You have always been a strong woman, and I trust that you will be able to face such a heavy blow, like this stupid war taking away all your sons.

There is no consolation, of course, I know that my words alone can't console you. But don't forget that you still have a very important mission, Mom: Karl and Roumald's children are left without a father, so they will need the support of their loving grandmother as much as you will need them.

I want what's left of our family to come together, Mom, and flee. Leave Europe. Maybe go to the United States, or perhaps South America... anywhere, but you can't stay here. I want you to live your old age peacefully, in a place far from all these troubles, carrying us and Dad in your

heart, knowing that our spirit will be with you forever.

Look at this photo, Alex had it with him when he died, he kept it in his chest pocket. My commanding officer gave it to me a few weeks ago when he informed me. Now I'm giving it to you, attached to this letter, so that you can also keep it close to your heart.

I did what I felt I had to do, Mom. So don't lament, because I died without any regrets.

I love you, Mom.

David

After I finished reading the note, I let it fall onto the rifle and began to cry like a child.

Fool. David was a fool. An imbecile. A complete retard. He never told us anything about all this. I can only imagine how much he must have silently suffered and cried at night. I was his best friend and I could never see beyond that stupid facade,

that perfect face that never stopped smiling.

David...

I would have done anything. I swear, if I had known, I would have shot him in both legs on any given day just to send him back to his mother, even if it meant a lifetime in prison. I thought about that old woman who was left alone. If I couldn't dare to look Zara in the eyes, I would be even less capable of facing that lady who had lost everything, to give her the letter when all the blame for David's death rested on me. My own thoughts suffocated me, and the tears continued to wet the rifle in my lap, as if trying to cleanse it.

Seconds later, Zara entered the room without knocking, probably assuming that I wouldn't have wanted to answer if she had knocked. I raised my head just to confirm who it was, my ruined face covered in tears met those dark eyes, wide open with surprise at my state.

"Alez, what is..."

"Just... just read this..."

. . .

Ten minutes later, the weapon and the letter lay on the floor, and it was Zara who leaned against my shoulder, sobbing after having cried an ocean upon reading the note.

"David was..."

"An idiot. David was an idiot..."

My voice still trembled, so she looked up and smiled at me before closing her eyes again, using me as a support for her weight.

"Yeah... I guess he was..."

It wasn't difficult for me to look at Zara again. I suppose part of the immense guilt I felt was transferred to my fallen comrade's mother, and the rest of that

guilt was diluted by the friendly smile that girl directed towards me.

"Does your leg hurt?"

"A lot."

We didn't speak any further throughout the afternoon. Instead, we decided to clean David's weapon together and then take a nap in bed. I forgot to go and see Kyd, and that earned me a scolding the next day.

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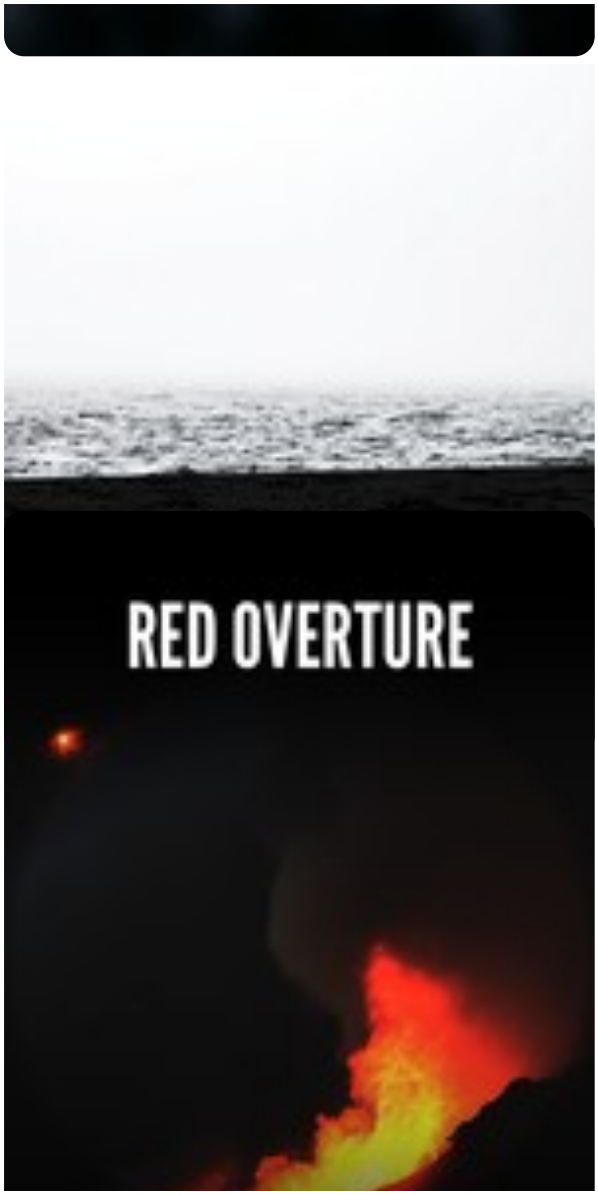

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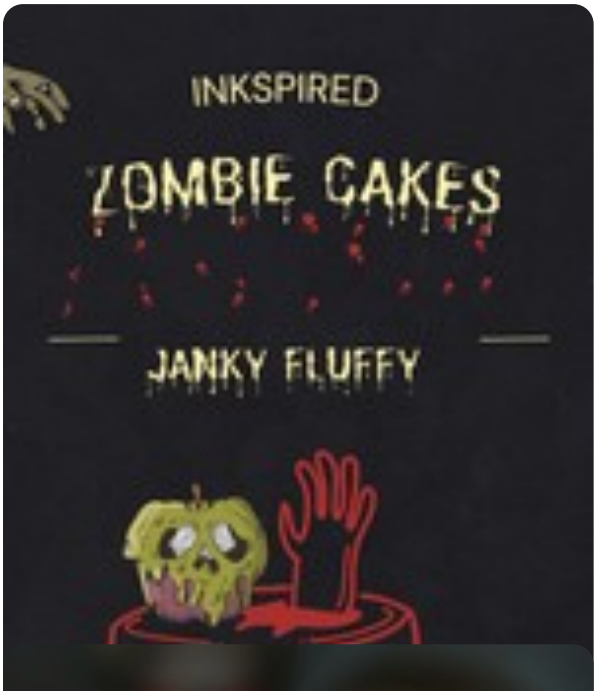

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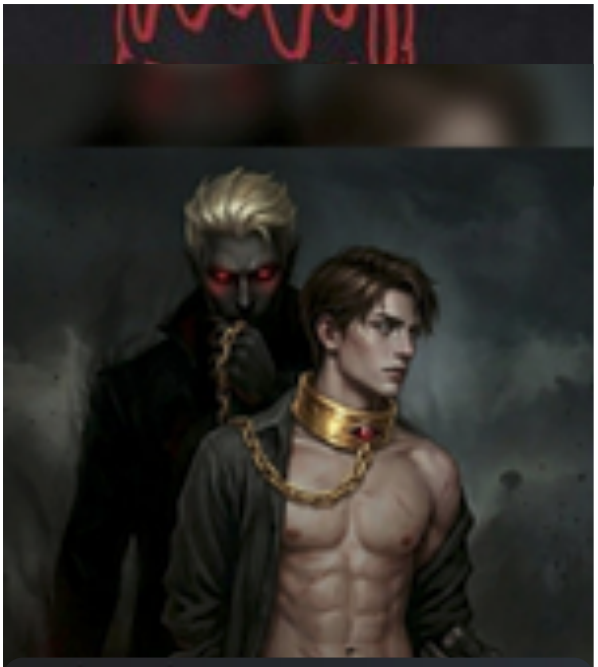

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